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William S Van Allen 04/15/2002 11:20:31 AM From DB/Inbox: William S Van Allen

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TELEGRAM

April 09, 2002

To: SECSTATE WASHDC - IMMEDIATE
Action: WHA
From: AMEMBASSY CARACAS (CARACAS 948 - IMMEDIATE)
TAGS: ECON, EFIN, PREL, VE
Captions: SENSITIVE, SENSITIVE
Subject: VENEZUELA'S APRIL 9 WORK STOPPAGE - EFFECTIVENESS
Ref: None

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

Summary

1. (SBU) The April 9th "paro" or work stoppage called by the opposition CTV labor confederation was fully effective in terms of business closures in Caracas - upwards of 80 percent. However, pro-government supporters at certain key locations in the city were focused, organized, and vocal, whereas opposition presence was non-existent. Pro-government MVR delegates achieved a working quorum in the National Assembly as opposition lawmakers boycotted the session. MVR delegates stay on message with declarations of the work stoppage's "complete failure." A late meeting between leaders of CTV and business association FEDECAMARAS has decided to extend the work stoppage a further 24 hours - until 6:00am, April 11th. End Summary.

2. (U) Econoffs visited several key locations in Caracas at midday on April 9th and spoke with participants involved in various pro-government demonstrations against the paro organized by opposition leaders CTV and FEDECAMARAS. The overall impression was that the work stoppage was highly successful with more than 80 percent of businesses closed. There were clearly more shops and eating establishments open in downtown Caracas near the National Assembly and various government ministries, however, even there, the closure rate exceeded 60 percent. Traffic was exceptionally light, except near the National Assembly and Miraflores Palace, where traffic was moderate, but far from the normal weekday gridlock.

3. (U) Observations of protest activities at the more important civic locations were as follows:

CTV Headquarters: 50-100 pro-government supporters were present with professionally-produced banners. There was a low level of activity, with several dozen Metropolitan Police present quietly watching the government supporters.

National Assembly: Throughout the day, there was a fairly large and noisy (sound truck, speeches, music, fireworks) rally by approximately 300-400 pro-government supporters. A large presence of Metropolitan Police and a smaller contingent of National Guard closely monitored this crowd.

PDVSA Corporate Headquarters in La Campina: Approximately 200 pro-government supporters protested the paro with a loud sound truck, speeches, and sporadic fireworks. Heavy police and PDVSA security presence kept the protesters 100 meters away. A PDVSA security guard said a large number of protesters arrived by bus at 8:00am, but that the crowd had diminished considerably.

Miraflores Palace: The surrounding streets were relatively quiet.

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but workers were assembling a large stage and sound system, presumably for a Presidential speech later in the day. There was a very heavy police and presidential security guard presence.

PDVSA Operations Headquarters in Chacao: A loud, agitated crowd of approximately 200 pro-government supporters crowded the main thoroughfare in front of the building, forcing passing vehicles to stop/slow down to accept various broadsheets. A high volume sound truck complemented by fireworks, whistles, megaphones, and horns carried the protesters anti-paro message. Several dozen Metropolitan Police and Baruta police were stationed close by monitoring the situation. This assemblage was by far the most aggressive and disorderly group seen during the day.

Plaza Altamira (site of previous opposition rallies): empty

4. (U) Other indicators of the effectiveness of the work stoppage: all shopping malls were closed, all banks were closed, PDVSA gas stations were open, but guarded by police, non-PDVSA gas stations were mostly closed, and most schools (including the Bolivarian School in Chacao), were closed.

Staying on message

5. (U) Econoffs observed National Assembly proceedings from the gallery earlier in the day. Even though delegates belonging to Primero Justicia and other opposition parties refused to take their places in the Assembly chamber and convened in the no-longer-used upper-house chamber down the hall, pro-government MVR delegates were able to achieve a working quorum (84 votes). Upon reaching quorum, First Vice President of the Assembly Rafael Simon Jimenez announced they would conduct a full day's agenda -- the chamber then broke for lunch.

6. (SBU) During the break, econoff spoke with [redacted] Both delegates gave the formulaic "the paro is a complete failure, both in Caracas and the countryside" speech. [redacted] insisted there is no realistic alternative to President Chavez - "only he has the answers for Venezuela." When asked to delineate the answers, [redacted] went back to his "the paro is a complete failure" litany.

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Comment

7. (SBU) The bottom line -- today's "paro" was quite effective regarding business, school, and office closures, but the pro-government supporters owned the streets - and probably the evening news. The opposition was invisible, at least as of late afternoon. The opposition will find it difficult to sustain support without more visible success. Late on April 9th, the Embassy learned [redacted] that the paro will be extended until 6:00am, April 11th. End Comment.

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